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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN PEOPLES PARTY WORKING TO TAKE CONTROL OF THE PUNJAB

Derived from: DSCG 05-1, B,D

¶1. (C) Principal Officer met August 26 with PPP Central Executive Member and Member of the Punjab Provincial Assembly Qasim Zia to review Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) efforts to wrest control of the Punjab provincial government from its former coalition partner, the Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N). Zia claimed that following the PML-N's resignation from the federal government on August 25, he and Punjab Governor Salman Taseer had been instructed to begin active preparations for a realignment of the Punjab government. Zia shared that the PPP had decided that the current provincial governing coalition of PML-N and PPP was no longer workable in light of the PML-N defection at the federal level. Neither party currently commands an independent majority in the provincial assembly (186 seats), although the PML-N (the current lead in the provincial coalition) has the largest number of seats with 171.

¶2. (C) Qasim Zia stated that with the inevitable split in the current provincial coalition, the key to power in the Punjab lay with the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) -- the official opposition -- and the PML Forward Block, an unofficial group of disgruntled PML MPAs who have been actively negotiating to join the governing coalition. Both groups have opened independent negotiations with the PML-N and the PPP over which party they would support should the provincial coalition split. The respective size of the two groups is uncertain, as no formal membership list for the Forward Block exists. The PML had 83 members prior to the creation of the Forward Block, estimates on the size of which range from 10 to 35 members. Post believes around 15 PML members are genuinely loyal to the Forward Block leaders.

¶3. (C) According to Zia, the PPP, which currently has 107 seats, believes that it can count on the support of Independents (4), Pakistan Muslim League - Functional (3), and Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (2) members of the assembly. This means that the party likely requires the support of both the PML and the PML Forward Block in order to oust the PML-N from control of the provincial government. Zia claimed that he had personally been charged with negotiating with the PML Forward Block leaders and that to date they were largely receptive. They were prepared to join the PPP in forming the government after the presidential election and to vote for Zardari in the presidential election provided that the PPP accepted them into the new coalition first and separately from the mainstream PML. Zia claimed that negotiations between Governor Salman Taseer and the Chaudhries had similarly led the PPP to believe that the PML would support them in taking over the provincial government. Zia admitted, however, that both groups were being courted equally assiduously by the PML-N following their departure from the federal government and that the final outcome could not be assured.

¶4. (C) Zia noted, however, that the PPP had two additional tricks that could tilt the balance of power in the province in its favor. The first would be to have Chief Justice Hameed Dogar invalidate Shahbaz Sharif's oath as a Member of the Assembly. Shahbaz, who ran in by-elections from two

constituencies, failed to withdraw his candidacy for the second after being declared victorious and taking his oath of office as a member from the first. The PPP, using somewhat convoluted legal logic, claims that this is unconstitutional and that, in fact, Shahbaz ceased being a member from his first constituency when he was elected a member from his second -- even though he resigned his second seat. If upheld by a court, this logic would invalidate his election as Chief Minister, an election which occurred when he was a member only from his first seat. Given the two-term limit on Chief Ministers, if Shahbaz is required to take his second seat, he could not be reelected as Chief Minister, placing the PML-N in a very difficult position, which the PPP hopes would ensure its Chief Ministerial candidate's support. Zia claimed that Chief Justice Dogar is prepared to issue the necessary legal ruling if requested to do so by Zardari.

15. (C) Failing all else, Zia claimed that the PPP was prepared to change both the Chief Secretary and the Inspector General of Police, thereby denying Shahbaz the necessary bureaucratic support to govern the province effectively. While both positions are nominally appointed by the Prime Minister, tradition but not law allows the Chief Minister of a province a say in who is appointed. The PPP is prepared to violate tradition, remove Shahbaz's handpicked officeholders, and replace them with PPP loyalists who would take direction from Zardari and Governor Taseer rather than Shahbaz. This, Zia claimed, was essential to avoid a repeat of 1988 when the PML-N controlled the Punjab provincial government and used it as a platform to destabilize the federal government of then-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

16. (C) Comment: The PPP strategy to obtain PML and PML Forward Block support appears relatively advanced. The PML-N is no doubt making a similar simultaneous push and the outcome cannot easily be predicted at this juncture. It appears certain, however, that the current provincial coalition government, like its counterpart at the center appears doomed to failure. End Comment

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